

**Final Report**  
**Michigan Council for Labor and Economic Growth**  
**Adult Learning Work Group**  
**2008 Regional Forums**

## **Introduction**

Local leaders in adult learning policy and practice across Michigan see an urgent need to reframe and reinvent the state's approach to increasing basic skills held by adult workers. At the same time, incredibly innovative partnerships are emerging that serve as examples of the dramatic scale of transformation that is needed, and leaders can readily be found who are committed to being part of a major, sustained commitment to basic skills improvement.

These themes were heard by state officials repeatedly during the course of holding seven regional forums this summer. More than 200 leaders participated in those forums, spanning employers, adult educators, literacy councils, community colleges, universities, Michigan Works! Agencies, community organizations, elected officials, and other stakeholders.

The regional forums were part of the research being done by the Council for Labor and Economic Growth's Adult Learning Work Group, which was charged with developing a set of policy and program recommendations about Michigan's next generation adult learning strategy as part of the work plan of its parent Low Wage Worker Advancement Committee. The Work Group's policy framework is being considered at the September 9, 2008 meeting of the Council for Labor and Economic Growth, to be followed in December by more specific actions proposed for implementation.

The framework being considered was influenced enormously by the feedback received during the regional forums. Every major recommendation being made was proposed in one or more (often several) of the forums.

The Adult Learning Work Group is comprised of adult education practitioners and administrators, literacy councils, community college administrators, university leaders, representatives of statewide adult and community college associations, four state departments (Labor and Economic Growth, Human Services, Corrections, and Education), area foundations, and local and statewide community-based organizations. The regional forums were one important dimension of the Work Group's research and deliberations, and were held to gain a better understanding of the current state of play in the development of basic skills in Michigan and the opportunities and challenges ahead,

The members of the Adult Learning Work Group would like to thank everyone who participated in the regional forums for their enthusiasm and insights into the potential future of adult learning in Michigan. The response to the forums was overwhelmingly positive; the forums were energetic, informative, and eye-opening. The energy reflected the unique opportunity and readiness across the state for an adult learning strategy that is sufficiently creative, flexible, integrated and accountable to meet the needs of Michigan's changing economy.

At each forum, the Work Group heard from two panels – a local exemplary program panel and a panel discussion featuring local leaders in adult education. Based on those discussions, participants were asked to share their individual ideas, concerns and advice in reinventing

Michigan's adult learning infrastructure. That advice was captured and is reflected in this report.

We heard a variety of exemplary practices from programs throughout the state, along with creative ideas and perspectives on the challenges and opportunities facing our current adult learning system. We are excited by the innovation we already see in pockets around the state, and by the willingness of many dedicated educators to come together in creating new, diverse solutions that better fit a range of needs today and in the future.

On September 9<sup>th</sup>, the Work Group will present its findings and recommendations to Michigan's Council for Labor and Economic Growth. All forum attendees will be sent a copy of the report and we welcome your comments. Even more importantly, we ask that you commit to staying engaged with the reinvention of how Michigan develops basic skills. We will be soliciting your feedback during the rest of 2008 as the Council moves to turn bold strategic intent and guiding principles into implementation strategies for transformation that practitioners can move to action immediately thereafter.

One key definitional point: the Work Group deliberately is using the term "adult learning" to describe its area of focus in order to ensure that the framework reflects both the full scale of the enormous need for basic skills improvement and embraces within it every type of organization that helps to fulfill those needs. This problem and its solutions don't fit neatly into any one agency or program; what we heard in the Forums reflects the Work Group's bias that our strategy requires a myriad of creative partnerships.

### **General Observations of Issues Impacting Practitioners**

**The need for basic skills improvement is growing** - In each region, practitioners told us that the number of adults needing to improve their basic skills is increasing. The adult learner can be someone who dropped out of high school, someone who has recently lost a job or someone who generally needs to improve their skills. While programs are trying to keep up, the growth in need is outpacing their capacity to serve adult learners. Many program administrators noted that they often surpass the state's cap on funded participants. Unfortunately, this trend is not isolated to individual regions. Practitioners told us that "often this is thought of as an urban issue, but in rural areas we only have a 50 percent high school completion rate for adults."

Not only is the need growing, but the "typical" adult learner is no longer typical. Often programs are attracting younger adults who are realizing sooner than in the past that they need higher education. Furthermore, community colleges are seeing increasing numbers of students with high-school diplomas or GEDs needing developmental coursework before beginning college-level classes. Administrators indicated that at least 60 percent of students entering Community Colleges require at least one developmental course in reading, writing and/or mathematics.

We heard many variations of a common theme throughout the forums - **the goal of adult education should be to improve adults' basic skills and to help them reach self-sufficiency.** Often adult learners enter programs with the goals of improving their income, and being better able to provide support and guidance for their families. Programs should be designed to meet "students where they are" and "ensure that programs always benefit the learner." Adult

education should help adult learners access training, meet their personal goals and connect learners to good paying careers in the labor market.

## **Programming Improvements**

### **Adult learners often need intensive services to support them as they face personal challenges**

– Returning to school is a challenge for most adults. Often they have multiple responsibilities, low wages and are unaware of where to go for help and how to maneuver through the system. In order to succeed in basic skills programs, adult learners need programs that recognize their individual challenges and connect them to resources to mitigate those challenges. For example, child care and transportation were named as very common issues for adult learners. While most programs try to provide these supports, we heard that it is often difficult to provide the level of support adult learners need and many programs, especially in rural areas, have difficulty accessing these wrap-around services.

**Adult learners often need help in navigating career and educational pathways** -- Practitioners told us that often adult learners are unaware of the career opportunities and the pathways to reach those opportunities. We heard that students need “navigators” to provide the mentoring and coaching required to effectively move through various systems. One individual stated, “We need support for students to complete the FAFSA and [college] applications at adult education programs.” Moreover, many stated that adult learners would greatly benefit from having intensive career and postsecondary advising.

A number of people argued that support for learners in adult education programs is just the beginning. Once placed into employment adults should be able to access support to help them advance in their careers and continue to improve their skills. In addition, adult learners should be equipped with the skills to advocate for themselves by “build[ing] self-advocacy into programs.”

### **Programs should accommodate adult learners’ highly varied schedules, challenges and skills**

– Adult learners have many diverse responsibilities, including work schedules and families. We heard that programs that are most effective have flexible times and locations to accommodate the unique schedules of the non-traditional learner. Often we were told of programs that are operated during the evenings and weekends or that are taught online, enabling learners to schedule their own coursework. Additionally, practitioners noted that many adult learners have immediate needs for education and cannot wait until the next semester to enroll in a program – “there should be more points of entry and year-round open enrollment programs.”

In many regions we heard that adult learners have a wide range of skills and individual challenges to learning. Overwhelmingly, we were told that programs needed to be responsive to the multiple skill levels of adults and create environments that build relationships amongst learners and practitioners. A number of practitioners stated that the field needs to learn how to deal with learning disabilities and differences and teach to unique skill levels. We heard that many adult learners have been told “they can’t learn” and need to have an environment that builds their confidence and empowers them to engage with the material. One practitioner stated that “individuals should be recognized and rewarded for the small steps.” Finally, many programs illustrated that creating a sense of community helped their adult learners work together to overcome their challenges.

**Adult learners need the opportunity to learn relevant skills in nontraditional environments –**

In each region we heard that adult learners have immediate and career related educational needs. They do not have the time to complete multiple degree programs before seeing economic rewards for their efforts. A number of practitioners suggested that adult learners could benefit from programs that offer contextualized learning, accelerating the educational pathway to careers – “basic skills should be integrated into occupational training.” Furthermore, many suggested that soft-skill training should be embedded in coursework to not only prepare adults academically, but socially.

Often forum participants said that adult learners were discouraged in their first educational experiences and were unwilling to return to those environments. Many argued that non-traditional learning environments were more inviting and accepting of adult learners and facilitated better learning outcomes. One region specifically noted that they try to house programs in non-school atmospheres, often simulating a workplace environment. Others suggested that apprenticeships and internships offer opportunities to learn in and experience non-traditional educational environments.

**System Improvements**

**Programs should be aligned, collaborative and integrated –** At each regional forum, collaboration was identified as a key component of successful adult learning programs. Forum participants often told us that adult learners are required to complete multiple assessments, visit multiple agencies and often have difficulty accessing all the services they need because of eligibility and funding constraints. A common theme was that the adult learning system should foster partnerships between local and regional organizations through common assessments, aligned curricula and blended funding streams. We heard, “there should be alignment between adult education and college entrance requirements” and “shared visions between organizations.” In some areas we were told that the system should foster regionalism and in others we were told that there should be local input and control.

Increased collaboration amongst stakeholder groups and agencies was mentioned at each forum. Often participants cited employers, the Department of Human Services, the Department of Labor and Economic Growth, Michigan Works! Agencies, Michigan Rehabilitation Services, the Department of Corrections, community colleges and adult education providers as examples of agencies that need to be active partners in the adult learning system. Suggestions for how to foster such collaboration included, “tie funding to partnerships,” “create a database of providers,” “give business a decision-making role,” “enable learning disability funding to follow students from the K-12 system to the adult education system” and “create dual-enrollment programs for adult learners.”

Additionally, collaboration was mentioned as a key vehicle for increasing the system’s ability to rapidly respond to the needs of learners, employers, and communities, as most noted that it would take various stakeholders to address the needs of these customers. Furthermore, we heard about the need to leverage resources among various stakeholders, including adult education providers, Michigan Works! Agencies, employers, Community Colleges and the like to support new models and approaches to meet new and increasing customer needs.

**Adult learners often fall through the gaps in transitions –** We often heard that there are large gaps between programs and agencies into which adult learners fall during transitions. For

example, there were many accounts of adult learners graduating from GED programs but not successfully transitioning to post-secondary education or training. Over and over, forum participants stated that the adult learning system needs to allow for seamless transitions and be responsive to the needs of adult learners and a changing economy. Many participants told us that requirements should be aligned and counselors should help adult learners make transitions. Moreover, we heard that the adult learning system should be connecting employer and community needs to aid smooth transitions. One participant said, “We need the employer perspective on the local level. By the time the state catches up to employer needs, the employers have moved on.” In order to create a system that is agile and addresses learner needs, employers and other stakeholders need to aid in creating a responsive and seamless system.

**Little is known about what happens to adult learners after completing a program** – Many practitioners spoke of their frustrations with not knowing what happens to their program participants after they leave programs. We heard, “there is no common data system, so we can’t track students from when a GED was attained to where they are now.” Without a common tracking system, many practitioners said they were unable to determine when and where adult learners dropped out of the system and how to reconnect with those individuals: “We need to reach out to students who dropped out through referrals and a tracking system for these students.” Furthermore, they expressed frustration with not being able to know accurately how many of their students went on to postsecondary education and training or improved their job prospects.

## **Cultural Improvements**

**Lifelong learning should become the expectation, not the exception** – Throughout the state, many told us that basic skills and continual learning are becoming necessities in a changing labor market. A GED is no longer enough to earn family sustaining wages. Forum participants had many ideas about how to create an expectation of lifelong learning, including common adult learning branding, and messaging campaigns. We heard that there were key groups that needed to support lifelong learning to create cultural shifts – “employer buy-in to the importance of lifelong learning is essential.” Additionally, many regions noted that post-secondary education can take many different forms including four-year degrees, two-year degrees and training certificates.

**Adult learning is often accompanied by a cultural stigma** – We heard many accounts of adult learners being stigmatized and reluctant to enter the adult learning system. Many stated that most students want high-school diplomas and higher education, but it is discouraging to return to a system of which they have negative perceptions. Overwhelmingly, forum participants told us that the adult learning system needs to work to remove the stigmas associated with adult learning and adult basic education.

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## **Appendices:**

### **Framing Questions for Adult Learning Forum Panel**

- What is the scale of the need for basic skills development in this region? Is the need growing or shrinking over time?
- What do you see as the goal or goals for current investments in basic skills development? What should those goals be going forward? (Examples: readiness for entering post secondary education; readiness for entry into career path jobs)
- What adult learning practices do you see going on that we should be expanding and replicating?
- Who are we reaching effectively with current approaches to basic skills development? Who are we missing?
- Should basic skills development be integrated with occupational training? Should we focus on developing skills within the context of the person's job?
- What is the readiness of schools and colleges to offer non traditional models, such as accelerated learning, contextual learning, modules smaller than a semester, etc.? Does Michigan need to embrace some or all of those models? Why or why not?
- We know funding for adult education has been cut in Michigan dramatically from past levels. Set that aside for a moment. If you could change three things in state policy and practice that would dramatically increase basic skills attainment, what would those changes be?

### **Framing Questions for Table Discussions**

- Given the goal to dramatically increase basic skills attainment among adults, what are the elements and characteristics that should be contained in Michigan's adult learning policy and funding priorities? You have a blank slate – what would make a major difference?
- How should we link the issue of basic skills shortfalls with the broader agenda for increased post secondary educational attainment in Michigan?
- What are concrete things that partners can collaborate on to improve lifelong learning opportunities for adults in your region?

## **Forum Presenters**

### **Detroit**

- Debra Porchia-Usher, United Way for Southeastern Michigan
- Jaffiria Leach-Orr, Detroit Public Schools
- Mary Jones, Wayne County Community College

### **Eastern Upper Penninsula**

- Kris Derusha, Tahquamenon Area Schools
- George Snider, Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians

### **Mid-Michigan**

- Lyn Knapp, Education Training Center
- Jeff McNeal, Education Training Center
- Mary Weise, Family Literacy Center

### **Northwest Michigan**

- Christy Nelson, Traverse Bay Area ISD
- Elaine Wood, NW MI Council of Governments
- Jean Peters, Healthcare RSA
- Annie Shelter, Kalkaska County RSA

### **Southeast Michigan**

- Bob Steeh, Novi Community School District
- Gregg Dionne, Hazel Park School District
- Michelle Irwin, L'Anse Creuse / Mount Clemens Adult Education
- Linda Casenhiser, Oakland Community College
- Niko Dawson, Oakland Community College

### **Southwest Michigan**

- Sid Mohn, The Opportunity Center
- Kim Thinnies, Kalamazoo Adult Education
- Scott Goodwin, Goodwill Industries

### **West Michigan**

- Vera Grishkina, Literacy Center of West Michigan
- Linda Krombeen, Literacy Center of West Michigan
- Carolyn Madden, Read Muskegon
- Courtney Schaub, Read Muskegon
- Curt Babcock, Whitehall Community Schools

## **Forum Panelists**

*Panels moderated by Andy Levin and Marcia Black-Watson, Department of Labor and Economic Growth*

### **Detroit**

- William Barber, Henry Ford Community College
- Susan Corey, SEMCA MIWorks!
- Erica Larkins, Focus: Hope
- Ray Metz, University of Michigan-Dearborn
- David Porter, retired, Detroit Public Schools

### **Eastern Upper Peninsula**

- Samantha Cameron, Bay Mills Community College
- William Sutter, Consolidated Community Schools
- Gwen Worley, Eastern UP MIWorks!

### **Mid-Michigan**

- George Barker, Mott Adult High School
- Robert Matthews, Mott Community College
- Katie Wolf, Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education

### **Northwest Michigan**

- Marguerite Cotto, NW MI College
- Mary Marois, Retired from Dept. of Human Services
- Jan Warren, NW MI Works!

### **Southeast Michigan**

- John Almstadt, Oakland County Workforce Development Division
- Niko Dawson, Oakland Community College
- Tracy S. Hall, Focus: HOPE
- Pam Kellett, Oakland University

### **Southwest Michigan**

- Jeannette Holton, Michigan Works! Berrien-Cass-Van Buren
- Rich Klemm, Niles Adult Education
- Anna Murphy, United Way of Southwest Michigan
- Chuck Philip, Lake Michigan College
- Chris Siebenmark, Legislative Aide to Senator Jelinek

### **West Michigan**

- Ashleigh Emmerson, West Michigan TEAM
- Chris Whittman, Orchard View Workforce Development
- Doug Wood, Orchard View Adult Education
- Eric Williams, Grand Rapids Community College



## **Adult Learning Work Group Members**

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Debra Porchia-Usher  
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Bob Steeh  
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